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CH'AN NEWS LETTER

No. 122 May, 1997

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The Dignity of Living and Dying

This talk was given by Master Sheng-yen on Sunday Oct. 27, 1996 and edited by Harry Miller.

How do we develop and maintain our dignity during life and sustain it when we encounter death? This is an important question to people in the East and the West. Many scholars discuss birth and death in reference to philosophy, religion, or medical science. I will address the subject simply from Buddha Dharma and my own experience.

Tibetan Buddhism has much to say about living and dying; Chinese Buddhist views on these matters are less well known. There are many similarities, but also some differences in the two traditions.

My talk can be divided into seven sections.

I. Transformation of Views

We can transform the common, ordinary views most of us have about life and death into a Buddhist perspective. Ordinary people feel that they have no control over their lives. They feel that there is no place for them, no one to rely on. We can change this sense of hopelessness into feelings of beauty, love, and value. We can grow and mature in the process. This is the Buddhist path and perspective. But how do we do it?

There are some Buddhists who hold a negative view of life. To them it is burdensome and filled with suffering and declining health. Such people ignore the fact that all attainment is rooted in this life and this body. Only through this "burden" can we attain Buddhahood. The Buddha said that a human life is a considerable achievement and the opportunity to hear the Dharma, rare. A human body is necessary to practice and it is a prerequisite for a life of wisdom. Life is not something to be wasted.

Again, some Buddhists believe that being reborn in the Pure Land is the best route to Buddhahood. But they ignore the fact that on the path to Buddhahood, a Bodhisattva must make his or her vows and practice in the human realm.

II. Relationship of Life to Death

Life and death are not separate. Death and birth follow one another.

Birth need not be considered particularly joyful, nor a great danger. Likewise death need not be sad. Everything depends on attitude. Not to know the beauty of life is a great pity and if you do not know the value of death, then it can only be a sad object of fear. Once you see that life and death are intimately related, however, you can find dignity in them both.

People may think life is joyful, but without dignity where is the joy? And if there is dignity in death, death need not be sad. Where can dignity be found? In three areas: the meaning of life, the value of life, and the goal of life. These areas touch on ethics, social relations, history, philosophy, and religious/spiritual investigation, but today we will examine them through Buddha Dharma.

A. The Meaning or Significance of Life.

Why is there life? Why does it continue? How does a long life differ from a short one? For Buddhists life is an opportunity to repay karmic debt, the consequences of past acts. Put in another way, we receive and accept appropriate karmic retribution from both good and bad actions in previous lifetimes.

B. The Value of Life

At the first level, the meaning of life, we *accept* karmic retribution. We accord with the principle of cause and consequence. At the level of the

value of life, we have the opportunity to fulfill all previous lifetimes' vows in this life. At this level we *take action* to fulfill our promises.

The value of life is not something assigned to you by someone else. It is not derived from other people. It originates only from your attempt to



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fulfill your responsibilities and your devotion to others. With the limited time and energy you're allotted, make the best of what you have and strive to be of the greatest use to those around you. It does not matter if others know or understand what you do nor does it matter how much you accomplish. Value derives simply from volition, duty and self-offering. We play various roles — parents, children, spouses, teachers, students. Each role demands an appropriate set of actions and responsibilities. Our responsibility is to be the best we can according to what is required of us.

We do what is beneficial to others without seeking anything in return. That is offering ourselves. We use whatever is at hand, material or spiritual.

We try to help not only individuals, but the environment as well. In this way we benefit ourselves as well as others and we practice the Bodhisattva path. This is the value of human life.

C. The Goal of Life

At this level we see life and what is beyond from a broad perspective. We determine where we want to go with our lives, and this includes sharing what we have with all sentient beings. We continue to aspire and make vows that will ensure our growth through a lifetime so that it doesn't matter if life is long or short, we live it with dignity. This dignity is genuine, it is not received from others; it is a result of a true, whole, view of life and its purpose. It is unshakable and cannot be taken away.

III. Interrelation of Life and Death

Life and death are really two sides of the same coin, part of an unlimited process in space and time. There is no reason to be attached to life or to fear death. Life and death are our right and responsibility. Accept your life and make good use of it. When it is about to end, accept and welcome death. We should neither attach to life nor hasten its end. We cannot hold on to either life or death.

How difficult!

Sometimes, when I see someone with a terminal illness like cancer, I say, "Do not simply wait for death. Don't fear it, either. One more minute, one more second of life is good. Take advantage of the time and cherish living." Fear of death serves no purpose, and, ironically, it only hastens death.

From the time a child knows what life is, we should let him or her know that there is also such a thing as death. Psychological preparation is

important, because life and death are inseparable. This is true for you and all your friends and relatives. Death can happen at any time and shielding a child from the knowledge of it can be damaging. Knowledge of life and death provides a healthy and wholesome perspective on the entirety of life.

We don't want to scare children needlessly, but we want them to know of the interrelatedness of life and death. They need to know that death will come to us all. We don't simply wait for death, but knowledge of it develops wisdom. At an early age Shakyamuni Buddha confronted the realities of birth, old age, sickness and death, and this led him to serious practice, enlightenment, and Buddhahood. It began with the acceptance of the reality of life and death.

While alive, we must respect life, see our potential, and do as much as we can to develop wisdom and help others. We need not fear death, only know that it will come. It may be the next moment or it may be a hundred years from now. There is no need to worry when it will come. Inevitably it will.



There was a disciple of mine in Taiwan, a judge, who was fascinated by fortune telling, so he sought out many astrologers and diviners. Interestingly enough, they all told him that he would die at sixty-nine. When he reached that age, he made arrangements for his family, distributed his wealth, and waited for death. But, he lived throughout the year without incident. He regretted what he had done, and asked me why he continued to live. I said, "Undoubtedly, you've accumulated virtuous karma, and this affected the length of your life." He lived to eighty-six, and presumably never saw a fortune teller again.

IV. Where Does Life Originate and Where Do We Go After Death?

This is obviously a very important question. Do you really want to know the answer? Philosophy or religion help some to understand where life comes from and where we go after death. Others rely on supernatural power to divine previous or future lifetimes. They meet with limited success.

Confucianists say that life and death depend on fate. But what they mean by fate is not well explained. Confucius said, "If life is not understood, how can we know about death?" Taoist master Lao-tzu said that when one is born the ground of death starts moving. In other words, the moment you are born the process of death starts. He also said, "to come out of birth is to go into death." Therefore Lao-tzu told us not to be afraid of death. The important thing is to

follow the path, or Tao, accumulate virtue and then let death come naturally.

Western religions posit a creator God who made us and calls us back into his presence when we die. This is also a helpful idea. A great being cares for us, so there is nothing to fear. In Materialism, only what you can see and experience exists, there is nothing before or after. Life is a light lit; death a light extinguished.

Western religions do not speak of past lives, but Buddhists believe every sentient being has a virtually infinite number of them. Where does life come from? Do we have to resort to these supernatural powers to determine past lives? It is not necessary and it is useless. Past lives extend too far back to be determined by any supernatural powers.

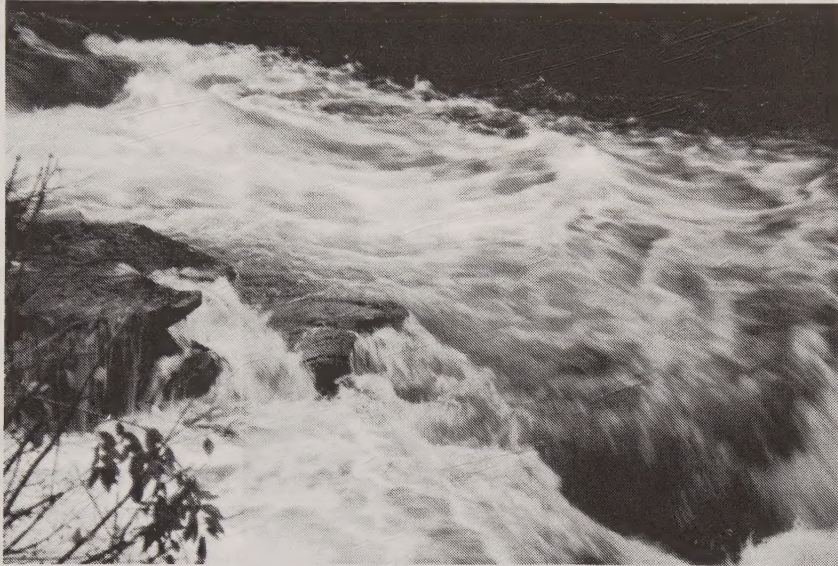


V. Buddhism on Life and Death

Buddhists believe that life came from a beginningless past. Death is not the end of the process, nor does the moment of birth begin the process. What we see as our lifetime now is only one iteration of an unbounded life process.

An analogy: if we travel continuously, we may be in New York today, Washington tomorrow and Chicago the next day. On the third day you could not be found in New York — you'd be in Chicago, but for how long? A person or phenomenon appears and then is gone.

In much the same way, death does not end life. It is a transition, an ending of a segment of life. What you experience as the end of your life actually begins another. There is no need for you to be disappointed in life; it's not really over.



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This comprises the previous, current and future. Previous lifetimes are endless and countless, likewise future lifetimes. Any given current lifetime, then, has a previous and, probably a future lifetime.

An understanding of life/death continuity can bring us hope and a feeling of connection through time and space with others and our own self. This understanding provides the reason for living in this lifetime, and shows that suicide, for example, is no real solution. It is a shunning of responsibility to past lives and commitments and will not cease our flow into a future life. On the contrary,

it only causes disturbance and difficulty in future lives.

These phenomena of life and death, this arising and perishing, can be divided into three kinds.

A. The Arising and Perishing that Appears in Every Instant

Every instant something changes in our mind and body. These are momentary births and deaths. Only because the physical form of our body is still present do we not take notice of such minute changes. The cells in our body, the thoughts in our mind, continually undergo birth and death.

B. Birth and Death Most Familiar to Us

This is the birth that leads us into a life of multiple years and the death that ends it. In other words, one lifetime.

C. The Arising and Perishing of Three Lifetimes

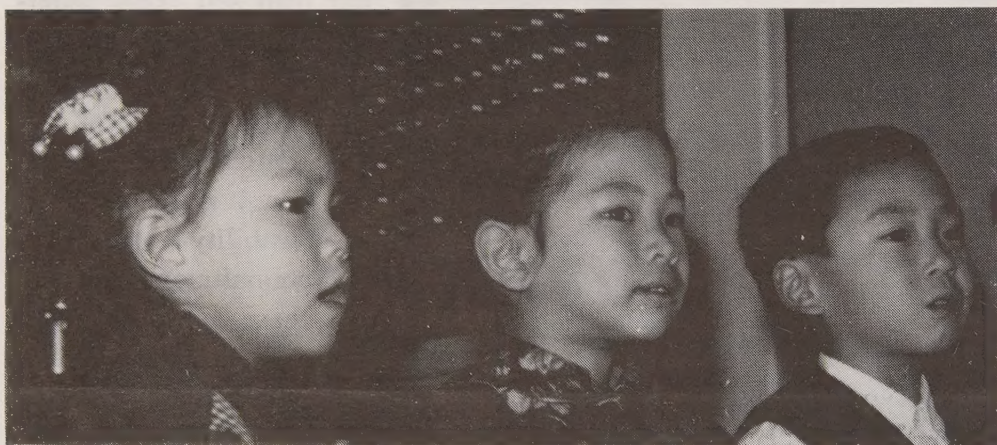
An understanding of the processes of life and death can help us develop and mature and look beyond this particular moment and our own self-interest. We can look at life and death in an entirely different way. With the help of Buddha Dharma we can move beyond continually hopping from one conventional life span to another to a point where we no longer experience life and death as ordinary beings, but as the sages do.

What is the transformation of birth and death? It is the final maturation of merit and virtue, the attainment of a Bodhisattva or an arhat. This transformation and maturation includes wisdom and compassion. Even the physical body may drop away to the point where mental energy will suffice to cultivate the path.

Buddhahood is beyond birth and death. This is the stage of great nirvana, transcendence of the

physical body and realization of the Dharma-body. The Buddha may still appear in any form, at any time, anywhere in order to help sentient beings still within the ocean of life and death. These appearances he takes on still manifest arising and perishing, but to the Buddha there is no attachment to birth and death, and no vexation or suffering of birth and death.

VI Dignity of Death



Wang Jih Tien

Death makes some of us uncomfortable. Maybe I shouldn't talk about it? (laughter). It is a very large topic, so I will simply make a few points about the subject.

Birth and death can be viewed from three levels:

A. At the first level, you live and die according to your karma. You have no control over when you are born or when you die. Even when you are alive, you do not live with clarity. A sentient being like this lives and dies in confusion. The Chinese saying is "You live and die as in a dream."

B. At the second level you master life and death. Living is fine; dying is fine. Life is lived to its fullest. Death is embraced courageously. You are full of joy when alive, and death comes swiftly with no entanglement or fear.

C. The third level is transcendence of life and death, the state of a great practitioner, who has reached great enlightenment, and who lives without attaching to life or death. Observing someone like this, you cannot find life, you cannot find death. It may seem that life and death are the same, but for a great practitioner they do not even exist.

* * *

We should be very grateful for death, for when it comes you can put down the myriad responsibilities you have in this life and bring all the merit and virtue you have accumulated into your next life, and you can do this with a sense of joy.

Bringing merit and virtue does not mean bringing everything we have — bank account, spouse, children — into the next life. That is not the right attitude.

* * *

The phenomena of life and death can be compared to the sun rising in the morning in the east, setting at night in the west. When the sun sets, it only moves beyond the horizon where it can no longer be seen. It does not disappear. When the sun rises in the morning, it does not suddenly come into being. When it sets it is not extinguished.

We are not extinguished by death, but the five aggregates (the body and senses) and the mind disappear from sight as the sun beyond the horizon. Pure Buddha Nature in us never ceases. Like the sun, it is ever present. Day is not really

day, night not really night, for the sun is always there. The physical body may disappear and reappear, but that has nothing to do with pure Buddha Nature.

Is death something to feel sad about? To fear? Not at all. There is indeed hope for the future and this is something beyond death.

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If you can maintain clarity of mind when death comes, you can accept it courageously and joyfully. Whatever you have done in this life, whether virtuous or not, you should be grateful for it all, because it is part of your training. At the moment of your death there should be no resentment, no regret, no anger, no pride. By-gones are by-gones. At the moment of death you should orient yourself towards a beautiful future. Your mental state at this time is most important. Regrets at this time are not to your advantage. Maintaining an equanimous attitude ensures an auspicious future. This next life might be in a heavenly realm or the Buddha Land, or, if in the human realm, you may have the opportunity to leave home and practice.

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What determines future life? There are six factors. First is karma, good and bad, that you have accumulated. Second is the weight (degree) of retribution, that is, the consequences you must face as the result of your actions. The more serious retribution will be borne before the less serious. Third is habitual inclination. Someone who has not accumulated great virtue or committed serious crimes, but has an especially strong habit or habit, will be reborn according to this inclination or obsession. Fourth is cause and conditions, that is, the circumstances and environment around you that will help determine what aspects of your karma will manifest. Fifth is your

mental state at death, the thought in your mind when you die. Sixth is the aspirations or vows that you have taken. These will determine where you will be reborn after death. If you have consciously been making vows all your life, of course that will have some influence. But for most Ch'an practitioners it is the last thought in the mind which is most important.

If our future depends on either karma or conditions (the first four factors), then the outcome is less reliable and less favorable. Earlier we talked about people who maintain clarity of mind at death. But what about those who cannot do this? What of someone who is in a coma or completely unconscious when they die?

In such situations friends and relatives can help. With great devotion and concentration they can chant Buddha's or a Bodhisattva's name, recite sutras and mantras, or simply sit close and meditate. The power of concentration, samadhi, and faith will aid the consciousness of the person about to die. Such practices lessen the fear and confusion which approaches at death, and they provide assurance and stability so that the one about to die will move in the direction of light and illumination. In this way rebirth into the lower realms will be avoided. I have seen how helpful such ministrations can be to someone who is about to die.

Even we practitioners cannot be so certain that we will maintain clarity of mind at death, so we, too, must rely on the help of fellow practitioners.

* * *

There is no need to prolong death with a myriad of instruments, nor should we lament out loud when death is near. This will only harm the one who's dying. Dignity lies in allowing peaceful, quiet death. It is best to be free of suffering, physically if possible, but certainly psychologically,

otherwise there may be negative consequences in the future.

VII. Other Topics

This includes specific questions which I will not cover: death by accident, abortion, or capital punishment. Can the body be moved after death? What is meant by the Bardo state and what is its importance? What is to be done if the brain is dead, yet the person continues to live in a "vegetative" state? Should organs be donated? Is suicide ever justi-

fied? Should terminally ill cancer patients be allowed to die naturally or can drugs be introduced that will speed up the process? What is the exact boundary between life and death? These questions can be covered another time. In the meantime you can begin to investigate the questions that are important to you.

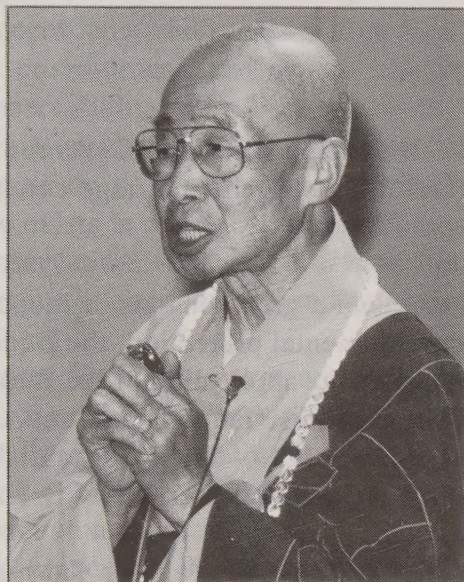
At all times it is important to treat the living and the dying with dignity. It is deluded thinking to believe that only dying will give us dignity. It is by living life purposefully with dignity that we bring dignity to death.



Nora Ling-yun Shih

Upcoming Events:

Buddha's Birthday Celebration: Sunday, May 18, 10 AM to 4 PM. This joyous event includes a talk by Master Jen Chun, performances by professional musicians who attend the Ch'an Center, and a vegetarian feast. Children are especially invited.



Master Jen Chun presiding at our
Buddha's Birthday Celebration

European Trip: During May Master Sheng-yen, assisted by Guo-gu Shi, will be speaking and leading retreats in Poland and Croatia. In Poland, contact Pawel Rosciszewski at tel/fax (48 22) 7575663. In Croatia, contact Zarko Andricevic at tel/fax (385)1-4574193.

Special Talk by Master Sheng-yen: "A Vision of the Pure Land in Contemporary Society," Sunday, May 25 from 1:30 to 3 PM.

Saturday Sitzings: May 17 and 24, June 7, 14 and 21, from 9 A.M. to 3 P.M. Open to anyone with previous meditation experience.

Beginners' Meditation Workshop: June 21, 9 A.M. to 1 P.M. Please call to register.

Introductory One-day Retreat: Sat., May 10, includes instruction in the Ch'an retreat practice, Ch'an methods of practice, an informal Dharma talk, and a moderate schedule of sitting, walking, chanting and mindful work. Please call to register.

All Day Sitting: Sat. May 3, 9 A.M. to 8 P.M. Please call for more information and to register.

Sutra Studies Class: the *Dhammapada*, Fri. May 2, 9 and 16 from 7 to 9 PM.

Friday Night Ch'an Class: June 6, 13 and 20, from 7 to 9 PM, 9 to 9:40 tea and socializing. Master Sheng-yen will speak about the stories of Ch'an masters' practice, experience and enlightenment in relation to our own lives. Please call for more information and to register.

Intermediate Meditation Class: Wednesdays, May 28, June 11, 18 and 25, from 7 to 9 PM. Master Sheng-yen will teach many Buddhist meditation methods, from contemplation on compassion to the ocean-seal samadhi of the Hua-yen school. He will also discuss the practice-realizations of the enlightened masters and their application to daily living.

Taking Refuge: Sundays, June 8, 15 and 22, from 9 to 10 AM. Transmission of the Five Precepts is also available by appointment.

News From the Center:

About fifteen people helped **clean the Center** on Saturday March 29. We got rid of a container of garbage, and left many "donations" on the street which were quickly taken by passersby. We cleaned the basement and first floor of the back building, and the second and third floor storage areas in the front building. Thank you, all participants.

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The Dharma Drum Mountain Foundation in Taiwan held a **Buddhist Marriage Ceremony** for 24 couples on January 18, 1997 to encourage simplicity and dignity in the marriage ceremony and happiness in marriage.

Marriage is a major event and it is customary in Taiwan to spend a great amount of money on the wedding celebration. In keeping with the principle of environmental protection, the Buddhist wedding ceremony discourages waste and display, and emphasises the application of the Buddhist principles of wisdom and compassion to family living. The Buddhist family must encourage people to be their best according to the principles of Buddhism, and to work to establish the Pure Land on earth. Building a Buddhist family begins with the marriage ceremony itself.

Master Sheng-yen, the head of Dharma Drum Mountain, has said that Taiwan has the highest divorce rate in the world because couples lacked communication skills and preparation for marriage. The Buddhist Marriage Ceremony reminds the newlyweds that marriage is a responsibility, but should not be a burden. It provides preparation for family life and encourages communication and promotes the use of Buddhist doctrines to insure family harmony. It encourages the new couples, their relatives and friends to share in the sanctity and joy of marriage.

During this ceremony, Master Sheng-yen gave the Three Refuges and a blessing speech for the brides and grooms. Additional blessings were given by the guest representatives. The president of the National Political University, Mr. Chen Ting-wong, was the official witness to the ceremony. Following the speeches, Master Sheng-yen handed out the marriage certificates and keepsakes. Later, refreshments were served to the brides and grooms, their families and guests. Over a thousand people participated.

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The Dharma Drum Mountain Foundation in Taiwan declared January 19th, 1997 **Community Environmental Conservation Day** as part of its year of activities to encourage environmental protection. Master Sheng-yen issued the following invitation for people to work together in this endeavor:

Embrace all human beings with a warmth and compassion.

Build the Pure Land using the clear, cool wisdom of your heart.

Understand how fortunate we are to benefit from the environment, and protect the environment so it can be shared by everyone.

Respond to your concerns with love. Feel regret for the present condition of the environment and purify it.

In all of your activities, protect the environmental and foster the mental and emotional wellbeing of all people.

Master Sheng-yen said that the purpose of this day was to let go of the old and receive the new, in accordance with the Chinese New Year custom. We should appreciate what we receive from the environment, recycle its resources, reducing unnecessary expenses and waste. However, conservation applies not only to the physical environment which we should protect, but to our mental environment as well. The Pure Land is reflected in our hearts and minds. The more we appreciate it, the more it provides balance for us. When the Pure Land exists in our hearts, it also exists in our lives. Master Sheng-yen added that, "Through this special day of environmental conservation, we wish everyone not only restore the physical environment but also to remind ourselves, our families and our friends that our minds need to be purified as well."

Master Sheng-yen went on, "What is the meaning of conservation of our mental environment? It is to make ourselves peaceful internally and to help other people to be happy. Usually we are greedy and if we can't get what we want, we get angry. Even a little frustration causes us mental conflict and we will criticize and complain. This makes our lives painful and worrisome. If we wish to maintain our internal balance, we should always realize that other people have reasons to do what they do. Even when there is no reason, that becomes a reason.

Making ourselves pure and peaceful, and knowing how to solve problems rather than creating problems is the meaning of conservation of our mental environment. We all want a peaceful and happy life. Therefore, we should



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try to make the other people happy. This is the Pure Land. We hope to make every day an environmental conservation day. We hope that other organizations will promote environmental protection, and that conservation will spread to every family. If we work together we will have a healthier, cleaner and more beautiful environment.

More than 10,000 volunteers from more than 500 community and social organizations in 27 provinces organized more than 100,000 total participants. More than 50 tons of garbage were collected in the Kin-San county alone, as well as recyclables such as papers, clothes, cans and glass.

Ongoing Activities, except during retreats:

Recitation Group Mon. evenings from 7:30 to 9:00 P.M. Amitabha Buddha recitation in Chinese, and prostrations.

Group Meditation: Tues. evenings from 7:00 to 9:00 P.M.

Ch'an Sitting Group: Fri. 7:00 P.M. to 9:00 P.M., with a social half hour until 9:30. An evening of sitting and walking meditation, with a short talk on the application of Ch'an to daily life or the concepts and methods of Ch'an. This is also an opportunity to ask Master Sheng-yen or one of the resident monks for guidance in practice. Please call for details.

Sunday Program: Meditation, chanting, vegetarian lunch, afternoon talk and afternoon meditation. 10:00 A.M. to 4:30 P.M.

First Saturday of each month: One day Ch'an retreat, 9:00 A.M. to 8:00 P.M. Please call for details and to register.

Last Saturday of every other month: Beginners' Meditation Workshop. In English: 9:00 A.M. to 1:00 P.M. In Chinese 2:00 to 6:00. Please call for details and to register.

Saturday Sittings: Every Saturday, except when other meditation is scheduled, from 9 AM to 3 PM.

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